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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive and correlational study was to examine perceptions of Ohio State University Extension county chairs regarding their human resource management competencies and performance of human resource management activities. The study also sought to describe the relationship between human resource management competencies and performance of human resource management activities of county chairs. County chairs were selected for study because they represent the first line of management most clientele and employees face. They also represent a group of Extension managers least likely to have formal education or specialized training in human resource management. The highest human resource management competencies perceived by county chairs were written comprehension, oral comprehension, written expression, information gathering, inductive reasoning, and problem sensitivity. The human resource management activities for which county chairs indicated the highest means were developing and maintaining positive work environment, administering wages and benefits, ensuring safety and health at worksites, and selecting and hiring employees. The correlation between the summated competency and activity score was significant with a very strong relationship between the variables, $r(86)=.71$, $p<.05$. (Contains 26 references.) (Author/MM)

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COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE OF COUNTY EXTENSION CHAIRS

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COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE OF COUNTY EXTENSION CHAIRS

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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive and correlational study was to examine perceptions of Ohio State University Extension county chairs regarding their human resource management competencies and performance of human resource management activities. The study also sought to describe the relationship between human resource management competencies and performance of human resource management activities of county chairs. County chairs were selected for study because they represent the first line of management most clientele and employees face. They also represent a group of Extension managers least likely to have formal education or specialized training in human resource management. The highest human resource management competencies perceived by county chairs were written comprehension, oral comprehension, written expression, information gathering, inductive reasoning, and problem sensitivity. The human resource management activities for which county chairs indicated the highest means were: developing and maintaining positive work environment, administering wages and benefits, ensuring safety and health at worksites, and selecting and hiring employees. The correlation between the summated competency and activity score was significant with a very strong relationship between the variables, $r(86)=.71$, $p<.05$.

Introduction

Skilled people are needed to coordinate the human, capital, and material resources required to accomplish the Cooperative Extension System's goals. These people, at varying levels of authority and responsibility, are accountable for the management of Extension. Management is inevitable and the job of management cannot be evaded (Drucker, 1977).

In performing their managerial duties, county chairs are responsible for planning, organizing, staffing or human resource management, leading, and controlling. To effectively and efficiently carry out managerial duties, county chairs need to possess relevant managerial behavior dimensions (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995). There are several models that describe county chair managerial behavior dimensions. Managerial behavior dimensions for county chairs include oral communication, planning/organizing, leadership, decision making/judgment, initiative, objectivity, development of coworkers, perception, sensitivity, management control, collaborativeness, written communication, behavioral flexibility, organizational sensitivity, and assertiveness (Haynes, 1997). Essential managerial behavior dimension for county chairs include communication, public relations, leadership, planning, image building, budget accountability, decision-making, evaluation, staff support, and motivation (Whiteside & Bachtel, 1987). Both of these models, as well as others, include similar managerial behavior dimensions for county chairs. In reviewing these lists it is apparent that many of the managerial behavior dimensions focus on human resource management activities carried out by county chairs.

The evolving roles of Extension managers have closely mirrored that of its business contemporaries (Patterson, 1997). Because there is not a unified body of knowledge related to management in Extension the literature review relies heavily on the business school point of view placed within an Extension System context.

Perhaps the most significant divergence between Extension and business is that Extension almost exclusively recruits its managers from within, while businesses rely on both internal and formally educated and professionally trained external recruits. Other things being held equal, management is management, regardless of whether you are administering a six employee county Extension office or a boutique shop (Higgens, 1994). That is, the work of managers is virtually the same; it is the context in which management occurs that varies.

It is this divergence that results in Extension managers having less managerial competencies than their business contemporaries. To some this suggests that Extension should hire formally educated and professionally trained managers from outside the organization to manage its affairs (Campbell, 1999). To others this is a clarion call that suggests that Extension must improve its efforts to identify and develop the best internal candidates for management positions (Stone, 1997; Broshar & Jost, 1995).

It has been shown that Extension is in the business of identifying and training its employees for managerial positions (Smith & Clark, 1987). The lack of formal education and training does perpetuate the problems associated with making poor managerial decisions. Most decisions made by county chairs through use of trial and error and common sense, however, have little impact on productivity or success (Lindner, 1999; Griffiths, 1959). In other words, any decision would be adequate. There are areas of management where county chair's decision would have greater impact on productivity and success, thus, warranting added attention. The human resource management function of county chairs is one of these areas.

Extension, however can take solace in the fact that less than 35% of trained human resource professionals possess the necessary competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) to perform their jobs as described (Yeung, Woolcock, & Sullivan, 1996). A study of more than 3,000 managers found that while formal education was associated with success, the academic major itself was not particularly important (Duncan, 1978). In Extension, the county chair who has an undergraduate or graduate degree in management will be the exception rather than the rule.

The competency gap, therefore, between formally educated and professionally trained human resource management professionals and home grown county chairs may not be that great. Given the low level of competencies obtained through external recruitment, many businesses and organizations, including Extension, are identifying and training internal candidates for managerial positions. The basis tenant that is being followed is as follows: Successful employees are successful because they acquired competencies in one or more occupational fields and excelled at applying those competencies, therefore, there is no reason to believe such an employee could not obtain and apply necessary human resource management competencies.

Because competencies establish the requirements needed to perform a job, competency models can be used: as an employee recruitment and selection tool; as an employee assessment tool; as a tool to develop employee training and orientation curriculum; as a coaching counseling, and mentoring tool; and as a career development and succession planning tool (McLagan, 1996). For competency models to be useful, competencies must be correlated to job activities (Parry, 1998).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine human resource management competencies and activities of Ohio State University Extension county chairs in staffing and human resource management.

The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To describe Ohio State University Extension county chairs with staffing and human resource management responsibilities by personal characteristics.

2. To describe Ohio State University Extension county chairs' perceptions of their human resource management competencies.

3. To describe Ohio State University Extension county chairs' perceptions of their ability to perform human resource management activities.

4. To examine relationships between the Ohio State University Extension county chairs' perceptions regarding human resource management competencies and their ability to perform human resource management activities.

Methods

The research design used for this study was descriptive and correlational in nature. The target population for this study was all Ohio State University Extension County Chairs. The population consisted of 96 Ohio State University Extension County Chairs. A census of the Ohio State University Extension County Chairs was conducted.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. Knowledge, skill, and ability competencies are based on the US Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network (O*Net; Mumford, Peterson, & Childs, 1997) and a review of the literature (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995). O*Net is a database of worker attributes and job characteristics that provides a national benchmark and common language for all users of occupational information. The first part was designed to measure the participants' perceived competency on 19 behavioral dimensions used to assess human resource management competencies. The participants were asked to indicate their current level of competence in each dimension using a five-point Likert-type scale. The points on the scale are: 1 = Very Low (VL); 2 = Low (L); 3 = Average (A); 4 = High (H); and 5 = Very High (VH). The second part was designed to measure the participants'

perceived ability to perform 14 human resource management activities. The participants were asked to indicate their ability to perform each activity using a five-point Likert-type scale. The points on the scale are: 1 = Low (L); 2 = Marginal (M); 3 = Good (G); 4 = Excellent (E); and 5= Outstanding (O). The third part of the instrument was designed to gather data on demographic and personal characteristics.

Data for this study were collected using a mailed questionnaire. Dillman's (1978) general procedures for mailed questionnaires were followed. A response rate of 94% (n=90) was obtained for the study. Of the instruments returned, three were returned incomplete, resulting in a usable response rate of 91% (n=87). To control for non-response error late respondents (n=31) were compared to early respondents (n=56) on the variables: gender, age, tenure in Extension, tenure as chair, program focus, academic rank and summated human resource management competency and activity scores. No significant differences were found; therefore the results of the study are generalizable to the target population.

The instrument was pilot tested with a random sample of 30 county Extension directors in Indiana. Instrument reliability was estimated by calculating a Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Overall reliability for the instrument was .96. A panel of experts established instrument content and face validity. The magnitude of relationships was described using Davis' convention (Davis, 1971). Alpha for all statistical procedures was set a priori at .05.

Findings

This section presents a summary of findings by objective.

Objective 1

The first objective of the study was to describe Ohio State University Extension county chairs with staffing and human resource management responsibilities by personal characteristics. The personal characteristics of the study included gender, age, length of employment, tenure as county chair, level of education, additional training formats, program focus, and academic rank or position. The majority of respondents were male (57%). The average age of study respondents was 43. Approximately 52% of the participants were between the ages of 40 and 49 years. Twenty-eight percent of the participants were age 50 years or older. Twenty percent of the participants were between the ages of 20 and 39 years.

The average length of employment at Ohio State University Extension of county chairs was approximately 15 years. Approximately 52% of county chairs were employed by Ohio State University Extension for 1 to 15 years. The average length of tenure as an Ohio State University Extension County Chair was approximately 8 years. Eighty-seven percent of county chairs had been an Ohio State University Extension County Chair for 1 to 15 years.

A majority of county chairs (91%) had a Masters degree. A majority of county chairs had used the training formats workshops or seminar (88%), assessment center (83%), and self-directed learning (70%) to increase their human resource management knowledge. Thirty-three

(38%) county chairs used the training format shadowing or mentoring. The training format formal class was used by 31% of county chairs.

Twenty-nine (34%) participants were from the agriculture and natural resources program area. Twenty-three (27%) participants were from the program area of 4-H/Youth Development and an equal number from family and consumer science. Ten (12%) chairs were from community development and other.

Forty-one (48%) chairs held the academic rank of Assistant Professor. Sixteen (19%) chairs were an Agent II rank. Eleven (13%) chairs were an Associate Professor rank. Eight (9%) participants were an Agent III rank. Chairs with the rank or position of Instructor, Professor, Agent I, Agent IV, or other comprised the remaining 11%.

Objective 2

The second objective of the study was to describe Ohio State University Extension county chairs' perceptions of their human resource management competencies. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of human resource management competencies. Seven human resource management competencies had means greater that 4.0: written comprehension (M=4.23, SD=.66), oral comprehension (M=4.21, SD=.73), oral expression (M=4.21, SD=.78), written expression (M=4.17, SD=.82), information gathering (M=4.16, SD=.75), inductive reasoning (M=4.15, SD=.76), and problem sensitivity (M=4.09, SD=.76). The four lowest human resource management competencies means were: administration and management (M=3.71, SD=.81), mathematical reasoning (M=3.61, SD=.99), systems perception (M=3.53, SD=.80), and human resources (M=3.46, SD=.77). A human resource management competency score (74.1) was computed by summing the individual human resource management competency item responses. The average of human resource management competencies was 3.9.

Table 1. Human Resource Management Competencies of Ohio State University Extension County Chairs

Human Resource Management Competency	M	SD
Written Comprehension-Ability	4.23	.66
Oral Comprehension-Ability	4.21	.73
Oral Expression-Ability	4.21	.78
Written Expression-Ability	4.17	.82
Information Gathering-Skill	4.16	.75
Inductive Reasoning-Ability	4.15	.76
Problem Sensitivity-Ability	4.09	.76
Problem Identification-Skill	3.95	.68
Fluency of Ideas-Ability	3.85	.74
Identification of Key Causes-Skill	3.82	.74
Solution Appraisal-Skill	3.82	.66

Visioning-Skill	3.80	.89
Management of Personnel Resources-Skill	3.78	.72
Identifying Downstream Consequences-Skill	3.77	.76
Originality-Ability	3.77	.83
Administration and Management-Knowledge	3.71	.81
Mathematical Reasoning-Ability	3.61	.99
Systems Perception-Skill	3.53	.80
Human Resources-Knowledge	3.46	.77
Average HRM Competency score	3.90	

Note:1=Very Low;2=Low;3=Average;4=High;5=Very High. Summated HRM competency score=74.1.

Objective 3

The third objective of this study was to describe Ohio State University Extension county chairs' perceptions regarding their ability to perform human resource management activities.

The means and standard deviations of human resource management activities are given in Table 12. The activities for which Ohio State University Extension County Chairs indicated the highest means were: developing and maintaining positive work environment (M=3.85, SD=.76), administering wages and benefits (M=3.77, SD=.74), ensuring safety and health at worksites (M=3.77, SD=.77), and selecting and hiring employees (M=3.74, SD=.78). The activities for which county chairs indicated the lowest means were: motivating employees (M=3.44, SD=.77), analyzing jobs and writing job descriptions (M=3.39, SD=.87), and appraising and counseling employees for performance (M=3.37, SD=.84). A human resource management activity score (50.1) was computed by summing the individual human resource management activity item responses. The average of human resource management activities was 3.6.

Table 2. Human Resource Management Activities of Ohio State University Extension County Chairs

Human Resource Management Activity	M	SD
Developing and Maintaining Positive Work Environment	3.85	.76
Administering Wages and Benefits	3.77	.74
Ensuring Safety and health at Worksites	3.77	.77
Selecting and Hiring Employees	3.74	.78
Legal Aspects of Recruiting and Selection	3.60	.91
Organizing and Designing Jobs	3.57	.74
Orienting, Training, and Developing Employees	3.56	.69
Complying with Legal Aspects of Compensation	3.55	.88
Complying with Fair Employment Laws and Regulations	3.52	.79

Human Resource Planning and Policy Development	3.52	.71
Identifying and Coaching to Resolve Employee Problems	3.51	.78
Motivating Employees	3.44	.77
Analyzing Jobs and Writing Job Descriptions	3.39	.87
Appraising and Counseling Employees for Performance	3.37	.84
Average HRM Activity score	3.58	

Note:1=Low;2=Marginal;3=Good;4=Excellent;5=Outstanding. Summated HRM activity score=50.1.

Objective 4

The fourth objective of the study was to examine relationships between the Ohio State University Extension county chairs' perceptions regarding human resource management competencies and their ability to perform human resource management activities. Figure 1 portrays the nature of the relationship between summated human resource management and activity scores. Visual inspection of the data showed that the elliptical swarm of points tended to fall along a straight line. This led the researcher to conclude the relationship examined was linear. The correlation between the summated competency and activity score was significant with a very strong relationship between the variables, $r(86)=.71$, $p<.05$.

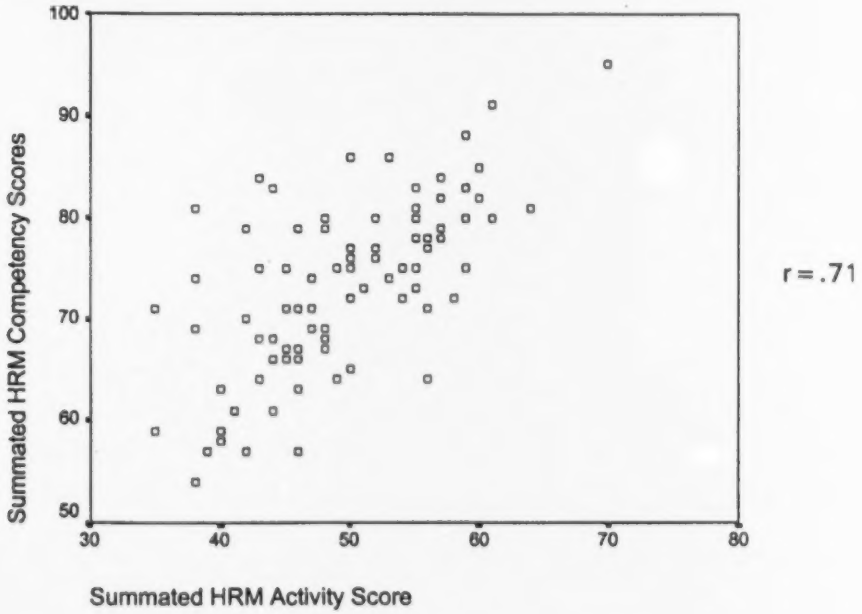

Figure 1. Correlation of Relationship Between Summated Human Resource Management Competency Score and Activity Score.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the review of literature and the interpretation of findings related to study objectives the following conclusions were drawn and implications given.

Conclusion 1

Ohio State University Extension County Chairs perceived their level of performance as good to excellent on the fourteen identified human resource management activities. Using means as indicators, county chairs had the highest levels of performance on the following human resource management activities: developing and maintaining positive work environment, administering wages and benefits, ensuring safety and health at worksites, and selecting and hiring employees. Lowest levels of performance for county chairs were: motivating employees, analyzing jobs and writing job descriptions, and appraising and counseling employees for performance.

Implication

In this study lower level of performance on analyzing jobs and writing job descriptions is of concern because job analysis is the most basic activity in human resource management. It is the basis from which most human resource management decisions are made (Mathis & Jackson, 2000). Lower levels of performance on appraising and counseling employees are consistent with other research findings. It has been found that managers have disdain for appraising employee performance because they are not properly trained, do not feel like they have control over the process, do not like to deliver negative feedback and messages, feel negative feedback and messages will adversely affect a person's career, and feel their performance will be judged unfavorably if the work of those they supervise is poor (Thomas, & Bretz, 1994). Performance appraisals are often used in counseling and motivating employees, which may help explain the lower scores reported.

Conclusion 2

Ohio State University Extension County Chairs perceived their level of competence as high to very high on seven human resource management competencies and average to high on twelve. Using means as indicators, county chairs had the highest levels of competence on the following human resource management competencies: written comprehension, oral comprehension, written expression, information gathering, inductive reasoning, and problem sensitivity. Lowest levels of competence for county chairs were: administration and management, mathematical reasoning, systems perception, and human resources.

Implication

Performance of any activity requires certain knowledge competencies. Knowledge required for a job is restricted to the information that is directly applied to the performance of an activity and is acquired through formal education, training, and experiences (Fleishman, Constanza, Wetrogan, Uhlman, and Marshal-Mies, 1995). Some human resource management

knowledge, such as constructing a Markov Matrix, would almost always be acquired through formal education. Other human resource management knowledge, such as conducting an interview may be acquired through training and life experiences. Knowledge of human resource policies and practices including laws and regulations involved in recruiting, selecting, compensation, and fair employment are needed to carry out human resource management activities. Low human resource knowledge competencies are a fundamental concern that should be addressed through a combination of formal education, training, and development.

Knowledge of administration and management principles and processes involved in business and organizational planning, coordination, and execution are also needed to carry out human resource management activities. Lower administration and management knowledge competencies are a concern that should be addressed through training and development.

Failure of county chairs to refer to and apply generally accepted human resource management and management knowledge might result in negative outcomes. In addition to being used as a developmental tool, Haynes (1997) recommended that competency assessment be used as a selection tool for filling county chair positions. Given the strength and direction of correlations between competencies and performances found in this study and those of Haynes and Kwarteng, Haynes' recommendation is well placed. As Smith and Clark (1987) noted, Extension is in the business of finding and developing its managers.

Conclusion 3

Ohio State University Extension County Chairs who reported higher human resource management competency scores had significantly higher human resource management activity scores. Haynes (1997), Ishaya (1991), Yukl (1989), and Kwarteng (1986) found similar results when comparing managerial competencies of county chairs to success in carrying out managerial activities.

Implication

Recognizing that Extension cannot centralize all human resource management functions, substantial resources are used to recruit and train Ohio State University Extension County Chairs to perform front line managerial tasks (Smith & Clark, 1987). Because county chairs tend to be promoted from within based on their successes in their subject matter discipline (Patterson, 1997), competency assessment has become an important managerial developmental tool (Haynes, 1997) and provides a basis for competency based training and development. It has also been shown that competency based training programs are more flexible and durable than activity based programs (McNerney, and Briggins, 1995; Lawler, 1994). These findings suggest a need for Ohio State University Extension County Chair competency based training regarding human resource management.

As Parry (1998) noted, a competency model must include competencies that are correlated with performance on the job. Because competencies can be influenced by an individual's personality type, biological function, social style, and/or personal styles and values competency models must be broad enough to allow for individuals to offset weaknesses on

certain competencies with strengths on others. The correlations presented here provide the necessary empirical evidence to support an Ohio State University Extension Human Resource Management Competency Model that includes the following behavioral dimensions: written comprehension, oral expression, written expression, oral comprehension, inductive reasoning, problem sensitivity, originality, fluency of ideas, mathematical reasoning, management of personnel resources, identification of key causes, problem identification, information gathering, solution appraisal, visioning, identifying downstream consequences, systems perception, human resources knowledge, and administration and management knowledge.

Recommendations

The results of this study provide the framework from which the following recommendations are made.

1. The results of this study can be used by Ohio State University Extension Employee Development Network as basis for understanding which human resource management competencies are correlated to the performance of human resource management activities.

2. The Employee Development Network can use these results as a basis for providing targeted competency based job analysis and performance appraisal training and development programs.

3. The Employee Development Network can use these results to continue to develop and implement training and development programs on the body of knowledge pertaining to human resource management and administration and management.

4. Replication of this study with other Extension Services and organizations is needed to evaluate the extent to which the results presented here would be similar and recommendations applicable. Additional research related potentially discriminating variables that may affect the results presented here are needed.

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